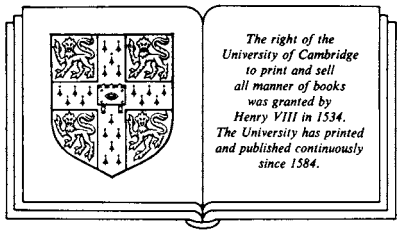
Brahms 2

biographical, documentary and analytical studies

EDITED BY
MICHAEL MUSGRAVE



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Brahms and England[1]

Of the many facets of investigation prompted by a great composer's work, the nature of its reception is one of the most broadly revealing, not least of the ever-shifting patterns of response and evaluation. The story of Brahms's music in England is no exception: it attracted interested reaction from relatively early in his career and he was soon installed as a leading representative of 'the modern movement in Germany'.[2] Whilst fear of the inevitable lionization discouraged Brahms from accepting repeated invitations to visit England – 'I know', he said to Ethel Smyth, 'how you went on with Mendelssohn',[3] he clearly knew much of the English scene and of the performers and performances of his works, not least through his tireless ambassadors Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim. They seem to have been almost as frequently in England as on the Continent and, with other great German performers of the day, notably Julius Stockhausen, Hans von Bülow and, later, Hans Richter – together with expatriates like Hallé and Henschel – founded a powerful tradition of Brahms performance in England. In their turn, prominent English musicians and their students, familiar by tradition with Germany and its musical culture, sought the composer out and provide us with some first-hand material, a notable example existing in the study by the pianist Florence May, for a time Brahms's pupil.[4] The fol-

[1] This paper was first given in conjunction with the exhibition 'Brahms and England' organized by Nigel Simeone in Goldsmiths' College during the London Brahms Conference, 8–11 July 1983, the handlist of which is reproduced as the Appendix on pages 237–45. Where it adds supportive information, it is cited in the present text in brackets (hereafter List).

[2] General acceptance was slower elsewhere, especially in France. The title of Françoise Sagan's novel *Aimez-vous Brahms. . .*(Paris, 1959; English trans. P. Wiles, Harmondsworth, 1960) – 'a vague social enquiry that requires no answer' – reflects the new interest in the late 1950s.

[3] Ethel Smyth, 'Brahms as I remember him', *Radio Times*, 39 (5 May 1933) 266.

[4] Florence May, *The Life of Johannes Brahms*, 2nd edn., rev. and enl. (n.d.; repr. Neptune City, N.J.: Paganiniana Publications, 1981) 2 vols. (hereafter May).

lowing letter from an older acquaintance, Sir George Grove, reflects the contact which existed within the right circles.

Dear and honoured master,

I hope that you will forgive me for thus writing to you; but I heard your new Symphony for the first time on Saturday finely played by Mr Manns's band and I cannot help sending you my deep and heartfelt thanks for the pleasure and delight you have afforded me by that noble and beautiful work. There is much in it that I could not appreciate at first and which will come to me after hearings; but I heard enough to make me thankful for your existence and grateful for the opportunity of profiting by your deep and lofty genius. . . .[5]

This letter is in a sense symbolic of the world into which Brahms's music came. The Concerts of the Crystal Palace, conducted by the pioneering August Manns (1825–1907), signalled a new era of cultural opportunities, heralded by the Great Exhibition of 1851. First located in Hyde Park, the Crystal Palace subsequently was rebuilt in Sydenham, then outside the metropolis, where it became the focal point for the display of all that was new and exciting in science and art, not least its own spectacle. Thus, Clara wrote to Brahms in 1859 that she was 'once more overwhelmed by the magnificence of man's handiwork'.[6] Shortly after, in 1858, the less spectacular St James's Hall was opened between Piccadilly and Regent Street, its Monday and Saturday Popular Concerts rivalling those of the Palace. Outside London, the work of Hallé made Manchester an especially important centre attracting important Germans, most notably Richter. It was largely through these new venues – with the newly emerging music societies of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge – as well as through the continuing role of such established locations as the Hanover Square Rooms in London, that Brahms's music was first absorbed.

Brahms's music becomes a subject for serious discussion in the middle 1860s. A key moment identifies itself with the publication of a letter to the editor of the *Musical World* on 7 May 1864 in response to a recent article on Brahms's music in the *Niederrheinische Musik-Zeitung*. The apparent purpose is to remind readers that this is the composer of whom Schumann had made such ambitious prophesies, to which end the writer, one Groker

[5] George Grove, unpublished letter to Brahms of 20 October 1884, reproduced by kind permission of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna.

[6] *Clara Schumann–Johannes Brahms Briefe aus den Jahren 1853–1896*, ed. Berthold Litzmann (Leipzig, 1927) (hereafter *Schumann-Brahms Briefe*) I. 509.

Roores, reproduces the essay 'New Paths'. But, in subsequently chiding the German critics for so undiscerningly accepting Schumann's claims, he reveals a strong reserve towards Brahms's music, specifically the two Piano Quartets. Thus: 'It struck me that the composer's talent was so wrapped up in, and smothered by, the fearful confusion of tone from all the four instruments played together without calm, without cessation, and without any light spots of melody, that it is nearly impossible for anyone to think of comprehending the works as a whole, far less of having any pleasing or elevating effect produced on his mind or imagination.' However, this view was not without implicit challenge – indeed it may even have encouraged response by the younger generation; for, on 6 July of the following year, Agnes Zimmermann, an outstanding pianist and well-regarded composer who had just left the Royal Academy of Music, gave the Piano Quartet in A major with a distinguished group associated with the Academy – Ludwig Straus, Alfredo Piatti and Septimus Webbe – at the Hanover Square Rooms. Perhaps because it was intended for the subscribers to the library of the publishers Ewer and Co., and therefore presumably private, it attracted no critical attention and only comes to notice through May's informal listing (May II, 451).

Chamber music was to remain the chief vehicle through which Brahms's music was introduced and can be traced, though it was not until 1867 that another chamber performance was given, this time by the more prestigious Joachim at the Monday Popular Concert of St James's Hall on 25 February, with Louis Ries, Henry Blagrove, Henri Zerbini, Alfredo Piatti and Guillaume Paque. The work was the String Sextet in B flat Op. 18 (List, 15). Clara wrote directly to Brahms:

> your Sextet was produced with great success at the Popular Concert yesterday. Joachim had, of course, practised it well and played magnificently. The reception was most enthusiastic, particularly after the first three movements. The Scherzo was encored, but Joachim wanted to keep the audience fresh for the last movement and did not respond to the call. I enjoyed it thoroughly and would have loved to have been the first violin. I really wanted to play the A major Quartet but Joachim insisted on the Sextet which he considered more appropriate for the first performance of one of your works in England. I gave way, but most unwillingly. . .I really played with them in spirit. (*Schumann-Brahms Briefe* I, 503)

However, her report seems to show more loyalty to Brahms than to the facts, for Florence May states that it made 'no impression' and that as a result Brahms was not heard at the Popular Con-

certs for another five years (May, 387). Reaction was strongly echoed by the critic of the new *Monthly Musical Record* (1871–1960) who noted divided opinions on Brahms, finding 'harshness, want of mastery of form, and immaturity' in the work of one clearly regarded as a progressive. Reviewing several works from score he observes with special reference to the Sextet in B flat major:

> The first thing that strikes us. . .is that Herr Brahms is a very unequal writer. By far the best of the compositions before us is the sextet for stringed instruments. The ideas are original throughout, and often very striking, and the work is to a great extent free from that over-elaboration and diffuseness which seem to be Brahms' great fault. The opening movement is charming, from beginning to end; the variations in d minor. . . are very interesting. More generally, he is evidently a man who thinks for himself; his subjects are always unborrowed; but there is a want of clearness of form, and a tendency to over-development, which seems more or less to characterize all the modern German school of composition, and which greatly impairs the effect of the whole. We do not forget that the same criticisms were made with reference to Beethoven's music at the time of its appearance; and it is possible that the time may come when Brahms's works may be accepted as a model; but until thought and idea comes to occupy only a secondary position, and elaboration is considered the one thing needful, we do not see how this can take place. (April 1871)

When the work's companion, the Sextet in G major Op. 36, was first given publicly (having been heard previously at Holmes's private concerts) on 27 November 1872 at St George's Hall in London, the critic of the *Monthly Musical Record* found it 'certainly in advance of the earlier work', whilst having 'equal attractions for the general listener', concluding that 'it is satisfactory to feel that this clever composer's works are surely though slowly, making their way in England'. But the critic of the *Musical World*, though accepting the cleverness and 'powers of no common order' was less keen. 'The Quartet is thoroughly representative of the modern German school, wherein its composer is a "shining light". We may be excused for not as yet pretending the meaning which Herr Brahms wishes to convey. That he has a meaning courtesy must assume.'

By May 1873, when the *Requiem* was reviewed, the critic of the *Monthly Musical Record* could state that performances of the two Piano Quartets in G minor and A major, the two Sextets, the Serenade for Orchestra in D and several piano works including a concerto 'have been heard respectively at Mr Coenen's concerts of "Modern Music", at Mr Henry Holmes's Musical

Evenings, at the Crystal Palace, at the Philharmonic Society's Concerts and at the Monday Popular Concerts'. Of these, by far the earliest was that of the Serenade, given even before the Sextet in B flat, by Manns at the Crystal Palace on 25 April 1863, though not noted critically.[7] The performance of the Concerto (the Piano Concerto in D minor) offers another example of Manns's initiative. The soloist in what was soon to be regarded as the most daunting of modern concertos was not a famous name, but a pupil of Holmes's, one Miss Baglehole, who apparently made a good attempt at it on 9 March 1872. The growing interest in Brahms's piano music was, of course, based on published works, though England had heard its first Brahms in the form of two piano pieces destined to wait until after his death for publication, a Sarabande and Gavotte which Clara included in a recital of 17 June 1856 at the Hanover Square Rooms, together with a 'Clavierstück in A major' by Scarlatti, as well as Schumann's Variations Op. 9, *Carnaval*, Beethoven's Variations in E flat and two pieces by Sterndale Bennett. However, if the Scarlatti was acceptable, Schumann's young prophet was certainly not: 'The *Sarabande* of the "new man", Johannes Brahms, is extremely difficult, extremely uncouth and not at all "in the style of Bach"' wrote the critic of the *Musical World* on 21 June 1856, though it was the Gavotte which she encored at the end of the concert (May I, 208); this critic's attribution of the encore to Scarlatti detracts from the value of his observations on the 'style of Bach', however. Clara retained her interest in Brahms's historical inclinations as a composer for keyboard. In March 1872 she gave his new transcription of the Gavotte from Gluck's *Alceste* in a St James's Hall concert which was well received, and destined to become a popular recital piece thereafter. Yet she did not attempt to repeat her great success in Germany with that most powerful pianistic expression of earlier idioms – the Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel Op. 24. Florence May names herself as having given the first performance on 12 November 1873 at the Crystal Palace, though contemporary reports indicate that it was played by Clara, as also by von Bülow after his first London performance in the same year. An important year in the dissemination of the piano music was 1876, in which Augener published a popular edition of all the works hitherto available

[7] See: H. Saxe-Wyndham, *August Manns and the Saturday Concerts: A Memoir and a Retrospect* (London, 1909) 62–3. The author quotes from Manns's programme note that the work 'exhibits perhaps less individuality than his later works, which are more independent of preceding composers'.

only in German editions which, as the *Monthly Musical Record* noted, were of greater expense. In setting the emergence of Brahms's music in a broader perspective, it is worth noting that the chamber works had been known in America since 1855, thanks to the efforts of Liszt's pupil William Mason, who gave the first performance of the B major Trio Op. 8 with Theodor Thomas and Carl Bergmann on 27 November of that year in New York.

The 'sure and slow' progress noted earlier was sharply interrupted by the growing reputation of *Ein deutsches Requiem*, which, as in Germany, made Brahms's name. It was first performed in England on 10 July 1871, the score having appeared in 1868, a private performance taking place at the house of Lady Thompson – the former Kate Loder – a prominent pianist of the day and teacher at the Royal Academy before her marriage (List, 3). The performance was of the piano duet version in which she was accompanied by Cipriani Potter and 'a large number of ladies and gentlemen' conducted by Stockhausen. It obviously stimulated immense interest. Stanford recalls that the Royal College wanted to get the first full performance, but that it went to the Royal Academy, predictably so with the contacts from the first private performance, and was first given at the Hanover Square Rooms under the choral conductor John Hullah. In fact, this performance was actually a 'public rehearsal' which featured 'sections from a *Requiem in F* by Brahms', namely 'Blessed are they', 'Behold all Flesh' and 'Ye who now have travail', with a Jessie Jones and Mr Popp as soloists. It escaped press attention, which was directed to the performance of the Second Philharmonic Society concert of the 1873 season on 2 April under W.G. Cusins at the St James's Hall noted as 'first time of performance in this country' (List, 7). The soloists here were Sophie Ferrari and Charles Santley, the rest of the programme including the Adagio and Rondo from the Violin Concerto by Vieuxtemps and 'The First Walpurgisnacht' by Mendelssohn. Critical reaction to Brahms's work can be seen to sharpen up with the appearance of the *Requiem*. The unqualified supporter was George Macfarren, friend of Stanford and Professor of Music at Cambridge, and one of Brahms's staunchest supporters. His important 'analytical and historical' programme note states: 'It is impossible in the space of these comments even to hint at all the extraordinary merit, technical and aesthetical, of the composition under our notice. . .When the *German Requiem* becomes known, lovers of music in England will feel, indeed, that their art has a living representative, that the greatest masters have a successor, and that the line of Pur-

cell, Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and those great men who have yet shone since through the blazing of his transcendent light, is not extinct.'

But the *Musical Times* detected some weariness in the audience, though not seeking to criticize from a single hearing: 'The Philharmonic concert room is not the place for a funeral service' and the work should not be surrounded by compositions 'in such violent contrast'. The *Monthly Musical Record* was also qualified, noting diffuseness, though also stressing the abundance of ideas and 'harmonic and contrapuntal treatment of amazing skill'. This favourable criticism is in accord with the reaction two years earlier to the work in score in May 1871, in which the critic of the *Record* considered it definitely superior to anything previously noted, citing particularly originality of form throughout and an admirable relationship of music and words, though also preoccupied with its 'over-elaboration' of ideas and counselling 'judicious curtailment'. In commending the 'artistic earnestness' in giving a difficult modern work, the critic noted, interestingly, 'a small but efficient chorus'.

The Piano Concerto in D minor, intimately associated with the *Requiem*'s origin, encouraged less general support at its second performance on 23 June 1873 at the Philharmonic concert, now with the established virtuoso Alfred Jaell, the critic of the *Record* still finding the first movement laboured, though powerful, and acknowledging the 'real beauty' of the slow movement and animation of the finale (List, 37). Response to the purely orchestral works was more encouraging. The Serenade in A, first given on 29 June 1874, at St James's Hall by the Philharmonic under Cusins, was preferred to the Serenade in D by the critic of the *Monthly Musical Record* (16 August 1874) because it was shorter, though not quite as short as implied by comparison with the observation of the critic of the *Musical Times* (August 1872) of the D major work: 'A Serenade in eight movements is too much for an English audience, however it may be endured in Germany.' As in Germany, the orchestral breakthrough came with the *St Antoni Variations*, first given in March 1874 and clearly indicating the greater rapidity with which Brahms's music now travelled to England. The critic of the *Record* picked up all the contrapuntal ingenuities, though stressing that they were not in conflict with the work's beauty and emphasizing the quality of the instrumentation, a point interesting in relation to the observation of the 'brilliance' of the instrumentation of the *Requiem* in the *Musical Times* review noted.

With the completion and successful first performances of the

Requiem and *St Antoni Variations*, it had become inevitable that Brahms's First Symphony, when it appeared, would attract intense interest and demand for performance; and so it was. The contact with England was through Joachim and Stanford. The University had determined to honour Brahms and Joachim, so Stanford conceived the idea of inviting Brahms to come and conduct his new work, and Stanford one of his. Stanford describes the event fully.[8]

On my return to Cambridge in January 1877, I found the organization of the Joachim-Brahms concert well advanced and everything promised success for the responsible undertaking. We were however to experience a severe disappointment. The rumour of Brahms' approaching visit got around with disastrous speed, and the Crystal Palace authorities publicly announced that they hoped for a special concert of his works conducted by himself. This ill-timed advertisement reached his ears and effectively stopped his coming. It had been a hard task to induce him to consider the journey at all, and it had necessitated all the pressure of Joachim and the humouring of Madame Schumann to get him within range of an acceptance, so greatly did he dread the inevitable lionizing which he would have had to face. He intended to visit Cambridge only, and to leave London severely alone. Curiously enough he told Mr John Farmer that his chief interest in London would be to explore the East End and the Docks. As soon as he saw what the Crystal Palace meant to do, he retired into his shell, and the opportunity was lost for good. The concert was fixed for March 8th, and the programme was as follows:

Part I

Overture, "The Wood Nymphs", op. 20	Sterndale Bennett
Violin Concerto, op. 61 (Joachim)	Beethoven
"A Song of Destiny", op. 54	Brahms
Violin Solos, Andante and Allegro in C major	J.S. Bach
Elegiac Overture (in memory of Kleist), MS	Joachim

Part II

Symphony in C minor, MS	Brahms

There was an orchestra of fifty-one, led by Alfred Burnett, and a chorus of about 150. The two preliminary orchestral rehearsals were held at the Academy of Music in Tenterden St, Hanover Square, Joachim conducting the Symphony and his own Overture. The Symphony gave a great deal of trouble, partly owing to the short and somewhat jerky beat of Joachim, which his own men followed with

[8] C.V. Stanford, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* (London, 1914) 173–6.

ease but which were enigmatical to English players accustomed to Costa's definite sweep of the baton, and partly owing to the inferior technique of the horn players, who were then the weak spot of British Orchestras. . . .

The London rehearsals attracted every professional and amateur musician within reach, and also many leading literary and artistic notabilities such as Robert Browning, George Henry Lewes, Leighton, Felix Moscheles, and other leading painters. A still more representative gathering came down to Cambridge to witness the conferring of the degree upon Joachim, and to be present at the concert. Amongst the ranks of the musicians there was hardly an absentee, Grove, Manns, . . .Osborne, Dannreuther and many more. Hallé was detained by a concert in Manchester. The performance of the Symphony, as of all the other pieces, was worthy of the work and of the occasion. Joachim wrote to Brahms 'Deine Sinfonie ging recht gut, und wurde mit Enthusiasmus aufgenommen, namentlich das Adagio und mit der letzte Satz taten's den Leuten an. . .Seit Cambridge ist das Schicksal des Werkes für England festgestellt, die Hauptblätter sind alle sehr warm, und je öfter sie nun gehört wird, desto besser fürs Verständniss.' This performance put the crown on Joachim's unceasing and loyal efforts to win for Brahms an abiding place in this country. Never had a composer a more trusty friend. The newspapers to which Joachim referred were represented by James Davison of *The Times*, Joseph Bennett of the *Telegraph*, Gruneisen of the *Athenaeum*, and Ebenezer Prout.

Brahms's withdrawal naturally affected the degree. His correspondence with Gerard Cobb, who acted as mediator between Brahms and the Senate of the University, will ring familiar to those adversely affected by such matters – as well as throwing other light on the subject. Writing from Trinity College, Cambridge on 12 December 1876, he proceeds:

My dear Sir,
I have taken the earliest opportunity of laying before the Council of the Senate the difficulties felt by you with regard to the reception of your Degree in person. I have today received their answer on the subject. The Council would have been fully prepared to have recommended to the Senate that should grant leave to you to receive the Degree in absence, but unfortunately the University *has no such powers* given to it by its Statutes. The only case in which the Statutes sanction such a course is that of a Member of the University who being *already in possession* of a Cambridge degree wishes to proceed to a higher one, and the case of one who has *not* yet taken a Degree here is expressly excluded. The words of the Statute are unfortunately only too explicit on this point and our Statutes are part of the *Laws of the Realm* which nothing short of an Act of Parliament can alter or amend. I am afraid therefore that the wish of the University to confer this honour upon you cannot be gratified in any way except by your

actual presence here to receive it. The Council of the Senate regret exceedingly that this should be the case, but there is no help for it, and they can only hope that your health may sufficiently improve to enable you to undertake the journey, and keep Herr Joachim company on the 8th of March next.
Believe me to remain, My dear Sir, Yours most truly, Gerard F. Cobb.[9]

Brahms's failure to attend elicited a markedly stronger response from the critic of the *Musical Times* for 1 April 1877, which makes it clear that Brahms's reasons had become the subject of considerable speculation and had caused a little hurt, though this held no sway in the face of the manifest musical goodwill created by the Symphony. The work was then given twice in London: by the Crystal Palace Orchestra under Manns on 31 March (List, 48) and by the Philharmonic under Cusins on 16 April. These performances have, however, more than nostalgic interest. A comparison of the respective programme notes with the music led an English writer in the 1940s to posit a different form for the slow movement, with a rondo not ternary structure, and a different first subject structure; that is, one lacking the striking digression at bar 5 of the present score. The recent discovery of some orchestral parts from the Vienna first performance on 17 December taken with English programme notes shows that what Vienna, and Karlsruhe on 4 November, had heard, Cambridge was to hear the following year – the first performed version of the slow movement.[10] Brahms's First Symphony was also to become associated with Cambridge in musical terms; just as Hanslick heard Beethoven's Ninth in Brahms's finale, so Cambridge heard the bell chime of Great St Mary's being rung by the horn at bar 30 of this movement. Whilst there is some substance in the first relationship, however, the second seems to have been entirely fortuitous.

Critical reaction was very favourable. Although reservations about the difficulties of Brahms's language did not disappear, Brahms's stature – his technical mastery and high purpose – were widely acknowledged and, crucially, there is a shift from seeing him only in the perspective of his mentor Schumann to the broader one of the symphony since Beethoven.

'Whether as a whole it will ever be "popular" in the sense in which that term is applied to the Symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven may be doubted; Brahms's style is too reflective, at

[9] Gerard Cobb, unpublished letter to Brahms, reproduced by kind permission of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna.

[10] S.T.M. Newman, 'The Slow Movement of Brahms's First Symphony', *The Music Review*, 29/1 (1948) 4. See further: R. Pascall, 'Brahms's First Symphony slow movement: the initial performing version', *The Musical Times*, 122 (1981) 664–7.

times too abstruse, to meet with universal appreciation. But the real traces of genius which abound in this symphony, and which become more apparent on each repeated hearing, are such as to secure for this great work a place in the esteem of musicians hardly second to that held by the Symphonies of Schumann, with whom Brahms has much in common.' With the Second Symphony, which the *Musical Times* reviewed in October 1878 following the May review above, the perspective was already shifting: 'Many of the most distinguished German musical critics have spoken of the work as "the greatest symphony since Beethoven"; and although one might perhaps be inclined to dispute the literal accuracy of the statement and to point to Schumann's Symphonies in C and E flat in justification of a different opinion, there can be no doubt that Brahms's C minor Symphony towers above contemporary works like Mont Blanc among the Alps.' And, in acknowledging the quite different character of the later Symphony the trend is confirmed: 'It may be said that the two works occupy toward one another a position somewhat analogous to that held by Beethoven's C minor and Pastoral symphonies.' From this point onwards Brahms's work meets less and less critical resistance and the reception of the *Alto Rhapsody* in June 1877 is the first without essential reservation.

With Brahms's growing acceptance came the development of a younger generation of native English performers inspired by the older German generation. The pioneering Agnes Zimmermann was of German birth, though she settled from early in her life in England. Clara's immense influence on the English scene, not least as effectively the sole advocate of her husband's music for many years, encouraged numerous pupils to travel to Germany. Among her students, Fanny Davies and Leonard Borwick were particularly notable. Fanny Davies is the more familiar; born in 1861, she lived until 1934, leaving us with a tangible link to the Schumann tradition and to Brahms through her recording of the Schumann Piano Concerto and her detailed recollections of the performances of both Clara and Brahms.[11] She gave first English performances of various Brahms works; the D minor Violin Sonata (with Ludwig Straus), the Piano Pieces Opp. 116 and 117, the Clarinet Trio (with Mühlfeld and Piatti) and the Clarinet Sonatas (with Mühlfeld). She is remembered especially in connection with the C minor Piano

[11] The Concerto is recorded on Phoenix Records ALP 1001. See F. Davies, 'On Schumann – and reading between the lines', *Music and Letters*, 6/3 (1925) 214–23 and 'Some personal recollections of Brahms as pianist and interpreter' in *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* I (London, 1963) 182–4.